

Markey Letter to the NSC Regarding Terrorism, November 10, 1998

November 10, 1998

Samuel R. Berger
Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs
National Security Council
Old Executive Office Building
Washington, DC 20506

Dear Mr. Berger;

I am writing to express my concern about the potential threat of terrorist or sabotage attacks against commercial nuclear power plants in the U.S. and about the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's recent cancellation of programs intended to test nuclear plants' counter-terrorism response. Recent bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and previous attacks against the World Trade Center in New York and the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, show both the desire and the ability of terrorists to mount serious attacks against large, well-protected U.S. targets. The widespread death and long-term environmental damage from the Chernobyl disaster have underscored that the destruction resulting from a successful attack on a nuclear reactor could dwarf the impact of terrorist attacks on other targets.

Nonetheless, as described in a November 3, 1998 article in the Los Angeles Times by Frank Clifford, "U.S. Drops Anti-Terrorist Tests at Nuclear Plants," the NRC has canceled its only program that tested nuclear plants' security using "force on force drills," (Operational Safeguards Response Evaluations), and using physical tests of barriers and alarms (Regional Assists). According to an NRC official, this program was almost identical to one used by the Department of Energy for its facilities. Although the NRC continues inspections of plant security, these inspections do not include physical tests or drills, and they only examine whether plants are meeting their security plans. Almost half of the plants tested under the canceled program showed significant weaknesses in protecting against the design basis threat, and in almost all of those plants the weaknesses were not due to plan violations. Thus I am concerned that many nuclear plants in the U.S. may not have adequate security against terrorist attacks and that the NRC oversight of nuclear plant security is inadequate.

I would appreciate it if the National Security Council would look into this matter and assess the potential national security implications of canceling this important program. I also would appreciate it if you would inform me of your findings and any actions taken.

Thank you for your attention to this critical security concern. I have enclosed a copy of a letter I wrote to Shirley Ann Jackson expressing my concerns and asking a number of questions about the NRC's counter-terrorist regulations and programs.

Sincerely,

Edward J. Markey
Member of Congress